

**The Place Between**

**An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)**

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Margaret Dimoplon", written in dark ink.

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## Abstract

This is the story of Ellery, a sixteen-year-old orphan forced into slavery and bound to the manor Ivenwald by her stepmother. Ellery lives in the land of Bledsoe, an enchanted part of Britain inhabited by the Eyes, an ancient race of folk with supernatural sight into the past and future. Ellery discovers that she possesses the Sight and must use it to save herself and the land of Bledsoe from Stepmother's dark magic. Inspired by her new friends Haven, a spectral emissary from the Eyes, and Sir Roland, a knight with a dark secret, Ellery also uses her gift to uncover the truth about her father's murder.

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Finally, I would like to thank my mother, who inspired my love of writing and introduced me to the literary world.

## **The Making of “The Place Between”**

When I was a child, I lived in my imagination. My best friend Nicole and I spent the summer devising adventures in her backyard treehouse. We ran around her neighborhood half-naked in our swimsuits—dirt and blood crusting our knees and elbows—on the trail of jewel thieves and other scallywags (a term we adopted from our fifth grade study of the Civil War).

By the time middle school appeared in my universe like an ominous UFO, I was unprepared for the social changes expected of me. Now I was supposed to giggle about boys at the lunch table and at recess. Now I was supposed to read Teen Beat magazine and the Babysitter’s Club novels. Although I did enjoy these developments for a few fleeting fragments of a minute, my curiosity quickly dissipated. I missed my old forays into the imagination and was becoming the one adjective I so despised—normal.

This is why I can honestly admit that reading saved me from a life of mediocrity. The day I uncovered Francis Mary Hendry’s Quest for a Maid at the library changed my life as a reader forever. In Quest for a Maid, a historically accurate mystery set in the fourteenth century, a fifteen-year-old Norwegian girl is charged with hiding and protecting a seven-year-old princess, whose life is being threatened by a witch and a murderous baroness with designs on the throne. This story, filled with adventure, romance, and intelligent, powerful, imperfect female characters so thrilled me that I read it at least six times during my adolescence. That, of course, does not include the countless times I opened (and still open) the book on a particularly bleak day and re-read a certain rousing passage.

Quest for a Maid, along with several other books including Katherine Pope’s The Perilous Guard and L.M. Montgomery’s Anne of Green Gables series, taught me two important lessons: first, that intelligence, wit, and resourcefulness are far more valuable traits than beauty,

and second, that the literary world can be a haven for those of us whose outlandish imaginations don't allow us to exist contentedly in the world of the living.

These realizations directly funnel into my impetus for being a writer. When I can't find a novel that satisfies my need to purge my imagination, I can create stories of my own to fulfill this need. And I am quick to admit that "The Place Between" is first and foremost a purgation of my imagination.

When I began brainstorming ideas for my thesis, I envisioned a satirical retelling of the Cinderella story with a feminist slant. My audience would be sophisticated adults, and my use of metaphor and literary allusions would be breathtaking. But as the semester wore on and I found all of my intellectual juices draining into essays for American Literature, articles for magazine writing, and short stories for fiction writing workshop, I experienced a moment of enlightenment regarding my thesis.

After a mentally taxing day of tutoring at the English Department Writing Center and studying for a midterm, I sat down at my computer and longed to be outside, wandering through the woods. But instead of wasting the rest of the evening dreaming about being anywhere but in front of the computer, I wrote about my feelings of entrapment. I created a character, Ellery, who felt even more trapped than I did.

As I began weaving together the threads of her story, I realized that I was having fun. I was able to step into Ellery's world, not just as an observer but as a creator—a manipulator of action. And even through this tiny, fictitious world only existed in a remote corner of my brain, I felt for the first time the rush of adrenaline one with power often feels. Ellery's world was my world, and while I was in the process of creating this world, it existed solely for my pleasure.

During the drafting process, I also realized that several of my original objectives for my thesis were not forever lost to the monsters of time limitation and writer's block. Ellery was organically becoming an intelligent and defiant young woman. She still doubted her ability to take action and stand up to Stepmother, but she was gradually learning self-esteem. Gone from her character were the docility and unswerving obedience of the traditional Cinderella. Ellery was also a morally flawed character, but in her existed the potential for change. This sort of realistic character is important for a young audience. Children don't benefit from intangible, holier-than-thou heroes; they need heroes who are just like them—moody, misunderstood but instilled with a desire to help others and blossom into empathetic adults.

Along with creating a protagonist adolescents can identify with, I also achieved another of my goals: to paint a setting and atmosphere with challenging language. As an adolescent, I was drawn to writers who didn't underestimate my intelligence. I was willing to consult a dictionary or an adult about a word or idea I didn't understand and appreciated a writer's respect for my mental capabilities. Also, writing with language that has not been predigested for the reader attracts a wider audience. For example, while I enjoyed the clever, empowered child characters in Quest for a Maid, my mother was enchanted by Hendry's detailed, lavish description of setting and action. I wanted to replicate this effect in "The Place Between." I attempted to paint pictures of Ellery's world with descriptive phrases and metaphors that the reader would understand and find aesthetically pleasing.

While I want the reader to become absorbed in Ellery's world, I also want the reader to ascertain several key messages from the story. I do not want "The Place Between" to be a morality tale as the traditional fairy tales were, but I do want readers to finish reading the story with a pleasant feeling of self-affirmation. As I mentioned earlier, Ellery is an imperfect hero.

Similar to Jonah in the Bible (who is famous for being swallowed by a whale), Ellery whines, complains, and tries to ignore and even escape her fate, which is to end her Stepmother's reign at Ivenwald. But even though Ellery is flawed, she is able to learn two important lessons during the course of the story. Ellery learns that an individual's family and heritage is an integral facet of one's identity and that idleness and selfishness can lead to the deterioration of the mind. These lessons help Ellery develop into a self-assured, decisive young woman. From this example, I hope other adolescents will understand that they too can make positive changes in their lives and in the lives of others.

These are also the lessons I learned while writing "The Place Between." While writing the story, I kept my mother in mind as the ideal reader. She taught me how to identify and appreciate a well-told tale, and a reader such as her—imaginative, hopeful, and adventurous—would be an ideal audience member for this piece. In addition to re-connecting to my family heritage during the writing process, I also gained confidence as a writer through diligence and dedication to work. From the moment I sat in front of my computer and willed myself to write "The Place Between," I began a life-long creative journey. I now know that I have the patience and passion to dedicate my life to telling stories, making meaning, and creating worlds.

# The Place Between

## **Chapter 1.**

When Sir Remus of Bledsoe was a boy, his mother told him tales of the Eyes, an ancient race of folk with the Sight. The Eyes rarely revealed themselves to others, but in times of war or plague, they came forth from the shadows and offered their vision. Once, in the times of unrest before King Edward put Bledsoe under his nephew's protection, an old woman cloaked in green appeared in the village Briar. She wandered to the town square, and the people, entranced, left their houses and shops and followed her. She sat beneath a tree and spoke of a great fire that would destroy the village and kill all its inhabitants as they slept. Some of the villagers, including Remus' family listened to the woman and packed their treasures and children and fled to the hills. Others, who did not fear the ancient magic, stayed in the village. Two nights later, invaders from the West vying for control of Bledsoe, burned the village, killing all who lived there.

Remus had since learned to fear the ancient magic that filled the land of Bledsoe. He was uncomfortable among the wild woods--the trees that seemed to whisper and stare—and he longed for the structured serenity of the village. But his wife, Isannah, loved the land. She spent her days wandering in the wood, and Remus quickly learned that although his young wife was sweet and kind, she also had strange ways. She often awoke in the night screaming and thrashing about in her bed. She would tell him of disturbing dreams—women with heads of serpents carrying Remus off into the woods, a baby who turned into a dragon and devoured her—and she believed these dreams were her the future. Remus tried to console her, but Isannah, so like a child, would not listen to reason.

Despite her peculiarities, Isannah brought Remus great happiness. In the summer of their fifth year of marriage, she bore him a child, a girl they named Ellery. The birth was difficult, and



in the months following, Isannah fell ill. One evening, when Remus went to bid Isannah good night, he found her sitting in her chair, rocking slowly and staring into the fireplace. Remus touched her shoulder, so thin and white, and she looked up at him, tears tiny rivulets down her pale face.

“My dear child, why do you cry so?” Remus asked her. It was only then she told him of her death. She begged him to find a gentlewoman to care for their child. Remus refused, but her tears made him frantic. He promised, and the next morning Isannah was dead.

A fortnight after Isannah’s death, Remus fled the wild place that haunted him so. He couldn’t bear to look upon his child, who screamed day and night for her mother. He left her in the care of Old Madge, his wife’s nurse, and fled to the village.

For ten years Remus wandered, searching for treasures to bolster his growing fortune. He traveled to hot, moist southern lands in search of ivory and spice and sailed to the East for strange fruit and exotic silk. Remus sent his riches home to his poor daughter, trapped and alone in the wild woods. But a man with no company but his guilt cannot bear himself forever. With his fortune complete, Remus decided to face the past. He embarked on a passage to Britain, and after three months of violent weather and ill-health, he arrived in Bledsoe.

Before returning to Ivenwald, Remus stayed in the village, Briar, to find a wife and mother for his poor child. His travels and the long journey by sea had taken a toll on Remus’ health, and one evening, while eating supper at the Hogshead Inn, he fainted into his plate of roast boar. Hours later he awoke to a strange, dark woman sitting by the fire in his room.

“Who are you?” Remus mumbled in a fevered stupor.

“Silence, my poor man,” the woman purred, watching him with clear black eyes. He tried to raise his head, but his body was no longer his own. Her form wavered before him, and he fell back to sleep.

The next morning Remus woke again to the dark-eyed woman. She sat at his bedside, arranging a tray of food. In the night his fever had broken, and Remus was now in control of his senses.

“My good woman, have you been tending to me all these days?”

She glanced demurely at her hands.

Remus took the gesture as an assent. “I thank you,” he said.

Later, the innkeeper told Remus the dark-eyed woman was the apothecary’s widow, Helene. In the weeks earlier, the poor woman’s husband had been trampled in front of his shop by a runaway horse. Helene was left with great debts and two young daughters to care for. Remus inquired after the woman’s residence to thank her with a bit of gold, and the innkeeper told him of a small cottage just beyond the village gate, at the entrance to Bledsoe Wood.

That evening, Remus visited the woman’s home, a small thatch-roofed cottage with a large garden in front. As he walked to front door, he admired the garden, which was filled with large, exotic plants.

He raised his fist to the door, but it opened before he was able to knock. In front of him stood the dark-eyed woman, with two raven-haired girls peeking around her skirts. Remus bade her good evening, and Helene asked him to join her for a stroll. As they walked through the garden, Remus began to forget why he had visited the woman. The green leaves and blossoms seemed to swell around them, and his head was thick with their perfume. All the while, the woman was silent, gazing diffidently into the wood.

When the soft blue of twilight faded into blackness, Remus left the cottage. When he woke the next morning, he remembered nothing except that he had found a mother for his poor child.

\* \* \*

Now the master had returned to his manor. Remus dreaded the sight of young Ellery, who he had not laid eyes upon since the child was an infant. She would certainly fear him as a child would a stranger. But before he was able to prepare himself to become acquainted with his daughter, Old Madge appeared in the entrance. A tall, skinny child with amber hair stood at her side, holding Old Madge's hand.

Remus led his wife and new daughters up the steps. He expected the child to hide behind Old Madge's skirts, but she did not demure. In fact, she was smiling rather brilliantly. Remus kneeled in front of the girl.

"You won't remember me child, I have been gone a very long time."

"Father," the girl cried, and circled her arms around his neck.

\* \* \*

The days that followed Remus' return to Ivenwald were strange ones. He suffered from bouts of fever and was often forced spend his days in bed. He was unable to stroll about the manor gardens with his daughter, as he had long hoped to do. But each morning Ellery would throw open the red velvet curtains enclosing his bed to give him breakfast. It was like waking unto an angel. Ellery had her mother's soft blue eyes and long, waving hair. She would never be beautiful, not like Helene's porcelain daughters. But Ellery's kind face and curious, almost mischievous eyes indicated a kind of beauty transcendent of the physical. Ellery would grow to be a wise, compassionate woman.

While Remus ate breakfast, Ellery would nestle beside him in the bed and tell him stories about the wood. She told him of a young squirrel she had trained to perch on her shoulder and a robin who had shown her to his nest of bright blue eggs. Most of Ellery's stories were childish banter, and he laughed at her wild imaginings. But some of her talk unsettled him, for it reminded him of his mother's stories about the Eyes. "There are voices in the wood," Ellery would say. "They whisper in the leaves." Remus would call her a silly child and ruffle her hair, but he knew that the child's observations were more than mere fancy.

Remus had other visitors at his bedside. Old Madge visited him daily to bathe him and change his linens, which were often drenched in sweat. He inquired after his new bride but was troubled by Old Madge's reports. "She busies herself in the village, buying finery for your girls. Just yesterday a coach arrived with three trunks full of fine gowns."

"And Ellery?" he would ask. "Do her new gowns suit her?"

Old Madge looked away from him. "There were no new gowns for Ellery. My lady says the child has not grown, and her old frocks will do."

Remus found this odd but did not inquire further. After all, these were women's affairs.

He thought nothing more of his wife's behavior until one day, his footman, Nathaniel, came to visit him. "Sorry to intrude, sir." Nathaniel stooped by the doorway and removed his hat. "But somethin's been eatin' at me."

Nathaniel told his master that Lady Helene had whipped his boy, Roland, for plucking a flower from her garden. "He only meant to give it to Ellery," Nathaniel implored. "He didn't know any better."

Remus knew Helene's garden was a sacred to her, but he had not thought her capable of such cruelty. He promised Nathaniel to speak to his wife, but the fever took him again, and he soon forgot the matter.

In the Spring, Remus' health seemed to improve, and he felt well enough to journey from his room. One rainy April evening, Remus found his way to the back stair and peered down to the kitchen, which appeared empty. "Helene," he called out. "Help me down the stair. I'm feeling much improved." He paused for a moment, but no one came. "Helene," he repeated as he took a step down the stair. "Come help your poor husband."

Stepping down to the second stair, Remus gripped the wall. He raised his foot to take another step, and suddenly lurched forward. "Helene!" he cried, as he tumbled down the stair.

## Chapter 2.

In the days following her father's death, Ellery lost herself in Bledose Wood. She had only known her father for a short time, but she had grown to adore his deep, rumbling laughter and his craggy, weather-beaten face. Besides, his was the only love she had ever known. The long mornings she had spent bringing him breakfast and telling him stories about her beloved woods were flickering in her memory.

Despite her youth, Ellery could sense the darkness descending on Ivenwald. The servants, eager to avoid Stepmother, crept about like spirits in the great manor's shadowy hallways. Ellery also found herself listening for Stepmother's footsteps in the long, empty hallways—if she heard her approaching she would duck into a closet and hide until Stepmother passed. Ellery simply could not bear Stepmother's cold, black eyes—eyes that seemed to see beneath her skin and watch, bemused, the frightening thoughts scampering about Ellery's brain. Even now, as Ellery wandered through the wood, she could feel Stepmother's eyes upon her. Even the white petals fluttering to the ground and the rush of cool air murmuring in the pines could not calm her.

At the edge of the wood, Ellery came upon a wooden fence and gate, hidden behind a tangle of ivy. Ever a curious child, Ellery was drawn to the gate, which she had not noticed before. She pulled apart the ivy and wondered at the sprawling meadow beyond. She stood, breathless, and watched as the tall, brown grasses rippled in the wind.

I have never seen a place so bright and endless, she thought to herself. Larks and blue birds somersaulted through the cloudless sky above the meadow, and Ellery longed to join them. She planted one foot on the gnarled old gate and tried to hoist herself over the top. But she found herself unable to swing her leg over. She could see nothing barring her way, but it felt as though she were pushing against a solid, stone wall. Desperate to clear the gate and romp through the

meadow, she swung her leg once more, but her body smashed against the invisible wall with such violence that she was thrown from the gate to the ground.

Ellery lay in a heap of dirt and dead leaves. Her knee throbbed, and she could feel blood seeping from her elbow through the sleeve of her dress. She remained still and listened for the squirrels chattering and crickets chirping in the wood. But the wood was silent and the air around her cold. She drew her cloak tightly around her shoulders and rose to her feet.

She walked along the edge of the woods, brushing her shoulder against the soft cool leaves and the sharp branches. All along the tree line she felt a solid wall—solid yet invisible. She continued on, one shoulder slumped against the tree line. The forest imprisoned Ellery, and she suspected that some dark magic was binding her to Ivenwald.

She trudged back to the manor, determined not to notice the brilliant, silver moon and the cheerful, chirping crickets dotting the manor yard. She wanted nothing of this beauty, for it brought her little comfort. The moon could dissipate into dawn and the crickets could scamper away to their hovels, but she could not leave this place.

When she reached the back gate, she could see the kitchen, its windows brilliant in the dark night. She could see three silhouettes in the window—one large and lean, the others small and round—and recognized them as Stepmother and the two little girls who never spoke to her, save a cruel giggle every time she passed them in the hall.

The girls, Livia and Florentine, were like fine, flawless dolls, and Ellery longed to play with them. But they spent their days with their French tutor and their nights being fitted for frocks Stepmother ordered from Paris and Florence. Ellery would often watch them unpack their gowns. As she looked on from her perch by the fireplace, they would lift the delicate gold material from nests of tissue paper, hold the gowns up to their shoulders, and twirl around the

room laughing. Once Ellery laughed along with them, until she noticed they had stopped twirling and stood side by side, staring at her.

“What are you doing?” Livia, the plump one, had asked.

“I think she’s laughing at us,” Florentine, the more beautiful of the two, had replied.

“I would never do such a thing,” Ellery had said. “Never! You both looked so pleased with your new frocks. I had to laugh.”

“She’s an odd sort, and I don’t like her,” Livia said to her sister.

“You’re an odd sort, and we don’t like you,” Florentine said to Ellery. “Why don’t you scuttle off somewhere before we tell mother you’ve been poking fun at us.”

Ellery had sat for a moment, not sure how she should respond to their cruelty. She thought of apologizing, of making them understand she had not laughed to spite them. But one look at their narrowed eyes and thin, tight lips told Ellery nothing she could say would matter. She rose quietly from her seat and ran from the room.

Now, standing alone in the shadowy yard and staring into the bright kitchen, Ellery once again found herself on the outside. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to be part of Stepmother’s family, but she was weary of her loneliness. For a few moments she had known her father’s love, but was it enough to sustain her forever?

Ellery paused a moment longer and walked slowly to the house. She entered the kitchen to find Stepmother and her stepsisters sitting around the kitchen table, laughing and consuming a great feast. The table was filled with bowls of oranges, plates of cakes and scones, and a tray of roast mutton. The two girls’ faces were covered with frosting, and Stepmother gnawed on leg of mutton, oblivious to the juices dripping down her chin. They did not cease their revelry when Ellery appeared in the doorway.



“Don’t stand there with your mouth gaping, you daft girl,” Stepmother said. “Come away from the door and fetch me some mulled wine.”

Ellery did not understand the meaning of this celebration, so soon after her father’s death.

“What are you celebrating?” Ellery asked, remaining in the doorway.

“Among other victories, a new servant has come to the manor,” Stepmother replied.

Ellery smiled. She hoped the new servant was a young maid—someone she could talk to. She had loved the old servants, many of whom had been driven off, and had thought of them as her family.

“Where is she?” Ellery asked. “What will she do?”

“She’s standing right before me, and she’ll do my bidding,” Stepmother looked up from her plate of food and continued to gnaw on a bone.

Ellery took a step backward and grasped the door frame.

“You know better than to try escaping, girl,” Stepmother said. “Now unless you want my boot to meet your backside, bring me some wine.” Livia and Florentine shrieked with laughter.

Ellery stood a moment longer and shuffled into the kitchen. She took a pitcher of wine from the counter and filled Stepmother’s cup. Then she stood at Stepmother’s side, pitcher in hand, and did not move. She thought of running to the woods, but it would not help her. She could not stay in the woods forever, and she could not leave the manor.

“Now she understands,” Stepmother said to the girls. They looked at one another and smiled.

Their laughter buzzed in Ellery’s ears--a dull, rising pain--but she could not retreat from the table. She did not fight against the stone veneer slowly spread across her face. A length, the cool crust spread further down, encasing her heart. “It’s better this way,” she thought. She

wondered if the others could see the change overtaking her, but they continued on with their feast and their cruel laughter.

### Chapter 3.

Six years passed, and Ellery found herself once again alone and wandering through the woods she so loved. As she collected firewood, soft white clouds moved swiftly above the trees. The hour was still young, but a deep indigo was quickly bleeding through the gray evening sky. Soon the unending cold of Britain's winter months would come; autumn's rubies and garnets would quickly fade.

Ellery paused to soak in the silver moonlight and leaned against the trunk of a towering elm. In the distance, screech owls rose from their perches high in the trees and swooped down to pluck mice and toads from the brush. The opossums and raccoons were also emerging from their boroughs—their iridescent eyes flashed at her from the tangled ivy and blackberry bushes covering the forest floor. All around her, golden leaves fluttered slowly through the air like downy feathers. Ellery closed her eyes and listened to the wind rushing through the branches like water trickling over smooth black rocks in a stream. The wind whispered, curling in and out of her ears, but she could not decipher its message. For a moment she envisioned herself as a mouse, scampering unnoticed, beneath the gate bordering Sir Roland's fief and away into the night.

"That's the only way I'm ever going to escape," she thought. "By some strange magic."

The image of Stepmother waiting for her at the kitchen door interrupted Ellery's thoughts. She picked up her bundle of branches and ran across the field behind the manor, dropping twigs and scattering mice hiding from owls and hawks in the tall brown grass. As Ellery cut through the garden at the edge of the yard, squashing an orange pumpkin beneath her clogs in her haste, Stepmother, pale and spectral, appeared in the kitchen window. Stepmother's

face flickered yellow in the firelight. Ellery shivered and pulled her threadbare wool cloak tight around her shoulders and ran faster toward the manor.

The kitchen's heat and the bittersweet smell of clove boiling in the iron cauldron in the fireplace seeped into Ellery's mind as she hung her cloak on the peg by the back door. She dropped the wood in a basket near the fire and gathered her rag and bucket to scrub the front hall before she went to bed. Stepmother, half concealed in shadow and silent, rocked in a chair by the fire. She stared into the flames climbing the sides of the cauldron.

"Come here," she said to Ellery without looking away from the fire. Ellery set her bucket on the knotted, oak table and kneeled on the worn blue rug at Stepmother's feet. The hem of Stepmother's black wool surcoat was crisp and finely-sewn—not like Ellery's tattered brown tunic, the hem of which was caked in cow dung and mud.

"Do you know what I found in your bedroom today?" she asked, eyes still fixed on the flames. Ellery was silent, motionless.

Stepmother reached beneath the rocker and withdrew a bit of fine red silk. She released it from her fingers, and it fluttered to the floor, filthy with ashes.

"You've been into your father's trunks again. I thought I told you he wanted you to have none of his things. With his last breath he told me the he wished my girls were his own."

Ellery had already stopped listening, for she knew Stepmother's words were lies. She had been young when Father died, but she could still remember his eyes, blue like cornflower. Such eyes were not capable of hatefulness. Ellery knew he must have loved her, and even Stepmother could not extinguish this flame blazing hot and bright in Ellery's memory.

Stepmother did not wait for Ellery's reply. "I remember the night your father was murdered," Stepmother whispered.

Ellery stared into the flames and thought of her mother. Each night Mother, soft and white, visited Ellery's dreams. Mother's yellow hair clouded around her as she floated in the air, her image undulating like a reflection in the water. When Ellery was young, she dreamed that Mother would pull her from her bed and together they would rise like smoke through the cracks in the attic ceiling and disappear into the inky midnight sky.

Stepmother's voice cut through the beautiful memory Ellery was trying to invoke. "His footman, Nathaniel was lurking in the house, searching for my jewels. Your Father caught him at it, and Nathaniel threw him down the stairs. Your poor father was too weak from the fever to save himself."

Ellery tried to move away from Stepmother, but her body was liquid, melting in the heat from the fire. She did not want to hear this story again.

"I found him in a pool of blood at the foot of the stair, Nathaniel crouched next to him like the beast he was."

Stepmother turned to Ellery and gazed upon her with mock pity. "I wish you would follow my rules. Your father would have wanted you to do so."

Ellery doubted this, but she did not speak, for Stepmother's voice was growing dangerously quiet.

"I don't know why you insist on hurting me so." Stepmother clasped Ellery's wrist with her white fingers and pulled her hand closer to the hot, iron cauldron.

## Chapter 4.

A strange dream plagued Ellery as she cradled herself on her straw mat on the attic floor. In the dream she was hiding in the hall closet beneath her mother's fur-trimmed riding cloak. Stepmother sat in the kitchen, across from the closet, her back rigid against Father's leather chair. Ellery saw her through the keyhole and watched as Stepmother plunged a silver knitting needle into a ball of red yarn, her lips moving without sound.

Father entered the room. The ball of yarn slipped from Stepmother's fingers and rolled beneath her chair. Father sat in the chair next to her and took Stepmother's hand in his own, stroking her pale, thin hand with his fleshy, pink fingers. His blue eyes were vacant and his face absent of worry or despair. Stepmother smiled at him, her thin red lips spread tightly against pointed white teeth. Suddenly her mouth, snake-like, unhinged. She threw back her head and clamped her mouth over Father's head. From the closet Ellery screamed soundlessly.

Ellery woke with a start. A large orange cat sat at the end of her straw-stuffed mattress. Ellery gasped, and the cat leapt from the bed and ran to the darkened corner of the room. From the shadows emerged a wrinkled old man wielding a twisted, oak staff. The room was dark, but a misty, green orb hovered around the man, who wore a green velvet cloak and had long, gray hair.

"I see you've had a strange dream."

Ellery did not fear the man, but she worried about Stepmother asleep in the room beneath her. "Who are you?" Ellery whispered.

"Haven. Of the Place Between." He sat on the floor beside her mat. "I see you do not fear me. You see too."

"If you don't mind, what is the Place Between?"

“It’s where we go when we are no more.”

“And ‘we’ are?”

“The Eyes, of course. The Ancient Race. Like you are, and as I once was.”

“But The Eyes are mere myth.”

“You know the truth. You’ve lived in this wild place since birth. Have you never heard the whispers? Have they never told you what will be? Have you never seen the past, perhaps in a dream, and known what is impossible for you to know?”

Ellery knew he spoke the truth, but she did not want this gift, this sight that brought her so much sadness.

“I know your sadness, my child.” Haven touched her arm. “You are haunted by voices from the time before, and you do not understand them.”

Ellery nodded. “I see my father in my dreams. I see horrible visions—my Stepmother—devouring him.”

“And this means nothing to you? When the past speaks to you, you must listen.”

Ellery could not speak, for she did not trust her own words.

"I cannot solve these mysteries for you, so you must keep listening, no matter the pain it causes. Keep listening." With these final words, Haven stood and backed into the shadows. With Haven's strange words thundering through Ellery's mind, she could only find sleep when the first light of dawn leaked through the cracks in the attic shutters. She was dreaming of a fawn grazing in a green field, when she awoke to the sound of the attic door slamming. She opened her eyes soon enough to see a tidal wave of water rushing toward her face. The icy water greeted her with an eager slap, and she sprung from her bed like a ghost from the grave. Once she had wiped the angry, frightened tears from her eyes, she could see Livia and Florentine standing in the doorway.

"You've been wanting a bath for months now, you filthy rat," Florentine said.

"Indeed," Livia agreed. "We could smell you from downstairs, so we came up here to kill the stench."

"Don't you think, sister, that the air is much more tolerable now?" Florentine asked.

"Most certainly," Livia replied. "What a pity we hadn't thought of this earlier."

Ellery stood in her dripping shift but refused to shiver in the cold morning air. She could not let them have the satisfaction of causing her any more pain. She continued looking at her feet.

"We'll leave you to polish your scales and sharpen your claws," Florentine said with a burst of laughter. With that, she and Livia left the attic.

Ellery removed her drenched shift and quickly pulled her only warm, wool tunic over her head. Tears burned in her eyes, but they would not fall. Ellery's tears had long ago fallen into obsolescence, for they brought about no change, no satisfying purgation of emotion. Tears only verified Ellery's helplessness.



## Chapter 5.

Ellery watched from the front window as a team of horses disappeared with Stepmother, Livia, and Florentine into the setting sun. Ellery was on her own, if only for a few hours. Stepmother had left her with instructions to clean the tapestries, though she made Ellery clean them every day. If Ellery left them just this once, perhaps Stepmother wouldn't notice. Besides, Ellery had been banished to the indoors all day with the task of putting up blackberries for the winter. It was hot, sticky work, and she longed to stroll along the creek that trickled through the woods. Perhaps she would even catch a few catfish for their dinner. Ellery gathered her cane pole and creel from the hall closet and broke off a few chunks from a cheddar wedge for bait. She slipped her bare feet into her clogs, whistled to Ollie the boarhound, and headed for the woods.

The stream waters ran quick, carried by the brisk north winds. Ellery sat on a large black boulder and cast her line next to a log jutting out above the surface. She let her line sink to the stream bed where she knew the catfish would be hiding in the hollowed-out log. When she hadn't felt a tug on her line for ten minutes, she set her pole aside and leaned back on the boulder. She would close her eyes for just a few minutes and enjoy the warm glow of the setting sun on her body—perhaps the last warmth the fall would offer.

Ellery tried to focus her mind on Haven's words from the night before. She needed to listen to the voices speaking to her from the past, which she knew were trying to tell her something about her Father. She tried to slow her breathing and concentrate on the sounds of the wood—the water lapping against the rocks lining the stream banks, the doves cooing to one another in the branches above her—but she saw nothing of the past. Her mind seemed empty.

Ellery had been dozing for several minutes when she was awakened by Ollie growling. Something was blocking the sun from her face.

“That’s no way to catch a fish,” a deep voice said.

Ellery opened her eyes and scrambled to her feet. A tall, thin red-haired man stood before her in a calf-length blue tunic gathered at the waist with a leather belt. He held a bow in his left hand, and large, dead hare in the other.

“I didn’t mean to startle you, young maid. I’m Sir Roland.” He bowed his head slightly.

Ellery quickly bowed before him. To be caught snoozing in the wood by a nobleman! Stepmother would have her hide for this. She struggled to think of some explanation, but he spoke first.

“This stream has the best fishing in the land. I’m sure you understand, being an avid fisherwoman yourself.”

Ellery reddened, startled by his candor. “Please sir, I was just leaving.” Ellery bowed again and turned to leave.

“Don’t leave yet. You haven’t told me your name.” He grabbed Ellery’s arm.

What did Sir Roland want with her? Did he not notice the tattered dress and bare feet of a serf? What was this strange game?

“Ellery, sir. Now, I must go. My mistress will wonder what’s keeping me.”

Sir Roland’s once friendly face now appeared troubled and he tightened his grip on her arm. Ellery wrenched her arm away and ran into the woods with Ollie bounding after her. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Sir Roland standing in the place where she left him, staring after her.

## Chapter 6.

As Ellery removed a tray of potatoes from the rack over the fire, she listened to Florentine and Livia screeching at one another in the next room.

“You look hideous in blue. Let me wear that gown,” Livia cried.

“You and your fat backside could never squeeze into it. And by the way, you’ve got a nasty spot on your chin,” Florentine declared.

Livia squealed, which was followed by the sound of cloth tearing. Ellery laughed to herself. “What a great lot of twits we live with, Ol.” Ellery scratched the dog’s stomach, and he flashed his toothless underbite in his version of a grin.

Ellery walked to the hall closet and removed three cloaks. In the front pocket of each she placed a hot potato. Stepmother, Livia, and Florentine would be leaving soon for a feast at Sir Roland’s manor, and they would need the potatoes to warm their hands on the long carriage ride over.

Ellery was looking forward to another evening to herself and longed for another romp in the woods with Ollie. Her thoughts were interrupted when Stepmother appeared at the foot of the stair. Ellery stood transfixed by Stepmother’s blood-red velvet mantle trimmed in black fox fur, which covered a thin black shift. Stepmother’s black hair, streaked with grey, was twisted into a severe bun at the crown of her head.

“Have you prepared our cloaks?” Stepmother’s voice was calm, too calm, practically a whisper. Ellery tried to think of something she might have done to incur Stepmother’s anger.

“Yes, of course, Stepmother. And young Barton from the village has arrived with the cart.” Ellery decided wide eyes and friendly smile were her best defense. Stepmother usually seemed amused by what she perceived as Ellery’s ignorance.

Ellery helped Stepmother into her cloak and waited in silence as Livia and Florentine scrambled down the stairs in a cloud of violet essence and peacock feathers. Green velvet draped Livia, and Florentine was stuffed into purple wool.

“Now, my angels,” Stepmother purred. “Are we ready for the feast?”

Livia and Florentine chattered and picked at one another like two screeching jungle birds, bickering over a bit of fruit. “Do you think we’ll sit near him, Mother?” Florentine inquired. “Do you think there will be dancing? If there is, he will certainly ask me before Livia. She dances like an ox.” Livia shoved Florentine with her enormous purple behind.

“Girls. Remember what I told you. You must impress Sir Roland with your refinement and grace,” Stepmother’s voice was dangerously quiet. “Now out to the cart. Quickly.”

Ellery stared at her bare feet. She should have known Stepmother would have designs for Lord Roland. She needed a wealthy man of good standing with King Edward to marry one of her daughters if she wanted to continue living a life of luxury. Ellery felt sorry for Sir Roland. He was certainly odd, but no one deserved a fate as cruel as a life with Livia or Florentine. Ellery turned to go back to the kitchen, but Stepmother barred her way.

“Now Ellery, would you be a dear and go into the root cellar and bring up a jar of the blackberry preserves you made yesterday? I think I shall bring some to Sir Roland.”

Ellery found Stepmother’s warmth unconvincing, but she could do nothing but obey. Stepmother followed Ellery to the kitchen. Ellery grabbed a candle from the cupboard, pushed aside the rug covering the trap door, pulled up the brass latch, and descended the warped oak stairs. She had always hated the long descent into darkness--the wet, mossy stench and the sound of tiny feet scurrying in the cellar’s dark corners. When she was half way down the stairs, she decided to go back for Ollie. She looked up to see Stepmother looming over the opening.

“You spoke to Sir Roland yesterday, in the wood.” Stepmother’s face radiated in the orange light from the fireplace. “You filthy little weasel. You speak to no one.”

“I’m sorry,” Ellery began. “There was nothing I could—”. But it was too late. Stepmother had already slammed the trap door shut, and a rush of air from the opening extinguished the candle. Ellery scrambled up the stairs and pushed all her weight against the door. It wouldn’t budge. Ellery was locked in, and the cellar’s darkness seemed unending.

She clawed and pushed with all her strength against the cellar door, but it would not move. As she descended the stairs once again, she shivered at the sound of tiny feet scampering across the dirt floor. In the darkness she felt her way to the towering oak shelves that stored the preserves; she would climb the shelf to keep away from the rats. Ellery pulled herself up to the fourth shelf, her fingers tangling in spider webs as she climbed. What will I do now, she wondered—suspend myself from these shelves for hours until Stepmother returns?

The rats were rustling beneath her, squeaking, communicating—planning their attack, she thought. Soon she would feel a tug at the bottom of her skirt, a sharp toenail impaling her shin, blood dripping to the ground, enticing the others. The creature would climb higher, frantically sniffing, scouting his course. She would lose her grip and plummet to the ground where the vermin awaited her. Ellery’s imaginings were nauseating, and she struggled to keep her grip.

After what seemed like hours later, the cellar door opened, spilling light into dusky cellar. Ellery shut her eyes at the sudden glow. The rats congregating beneath her squealed and scattered as a large orange cat bounded down the stairs. He was followed by a faint, green cloud, which hovered in the air behind him. The cat chased an enormous rat into the dark corner of the cellar, and the green orb settled in front of Ellery and solidified.

“You haven’t been listening Ellery. You should have known your Stepmother would see you and Sir Roland in the wood.”

Ellery sighed and hopped down from perch on the shelves. Haven’s presence calmed her, but she found his blunt speech irksome.

“Your Stepmother has dark gifts, Ellery. She too has eyes in the woods—ears in the wind. But she is not one of us. Her magic comes from a dark place—the Place Below.”

“You mean Stepmother is a witch?”

“Your stepmother cannot See on her own. Not like you and I. She has other ways.” Ellery thought of the cauldron—the strange black liquids swirling in the water.

“So how do we know that she’s not watching us now, listening to all that we say?”

“She’s concentrating all her efforts elsewhere.”

“On Sir Roland?”

“Indeed. But he is not like the others.” Haven looked deeply into Ellery’s eyes, and she reddened.

“He is strange. He spoke as though he did not know I am a servant.” Ellery picked at a fold in her skirt. “He reminded me of someone, but that is impossible, for I know no one.”

“Your time did not begin with your stepmother’s reign at Ivenwald. There was a Time Before. Do you not remember?”

Ellery thought of Old Madge, her nurse, and Nathaniel, her father’s footman. Nathaniel and his family had lived in a small cottage at the edge of Ivenwald. Ellery knew Nathaniel and his wife must be long dead. She had never been able to fully believe Nathaniel had murdered her father. He had always been such a kind, quiet man, and his wife would bake her sweet cakes and tell her stories about her mother. The boy, she could not remember his name, was older than she,

but they had often played together in the woods. Once he had brought her a strange purple flower. She assumed it was from Stepmother's garden, but shortly after her father was killed. Nathaniel and his family had disappeared and were never heard from again.

"I can think of no one." Ellery would not meet Haven's eyes. Haven sighed.

"Sometimes the impossible is an illusion. You must listen to what the past tells you."

"I don't understand the past," Ellery said quietly. " But I certainly pity Sir Roland. Soon he will lose control of his will, of his very future."

"And will you do nothing do save him?"

"It is impossible. I cannot leave this place."

Haven laughed softly. "Nothing is impossible. I can release you from the curse for but an hour, to do the work of the Eyes. You must save Sir Roland from the dark magic."

"You fear Stepmother too. You and the Eyes." Ellery looked up at him.

"Her darkness cannot descend on this land. It cannot be."

Ellery rose to her feet. "Help me then, Haven. Get me beyond the gate."

## **Chapter 7.**

An hour later, Ellery was running through Sir Roland's pasture, towards the manor at the north end of the field. She only had a half hour to somehow contact Sir Roland. At midnight Haven's suspension of Stepmother's curse would end, and if Ellery wasn't back at Ivenwald, Stepmother would know of her absence.

When Ellery reached Sir Roland's manor, she wondered how she would get past the guards at the front gate. But as she drew closer, ducking behind trees to conceal herself, she saw the guards were snoozing, leaning against the stone manor wall with a jug at their feet. She scampered past them unnoticed and followed the sound of laughter and mandolin music through the manor's dark hallways. She came to a great room at the center of the manor and peeked around the doorway.

Ellery laughed as she examined the tableaux before her. Sir Roland sat in the center of a long table covered with food. Roast mutton towered before him, and bread and sweet cakes lined the length of the table. Ellery spotted Stepmother, Livia, and Florentine at the end of the table, far away from Sir Roland. Stepmother was not eating; she stared wickedly at the young, yellow-haired maid perched next to Sir Roland. Livia gnawed on a leg of mutton, and Florentine giggled at the man sitting next to her—a small, skinny man with a mandolin—a troubadour of some sort, perhaps the evening's entertainment. Stepmother's magic had been unsuccessful after all. Perhaps Haven's fears had been unwarranted.



Suddenly, a commotion arose near Sir Roland. The maid sitting next to him slumped over into her gold plate. Ellery glanced at Stepmother, whose black eyes glowed with a strange light. She turned toward the doorway, and Ellery tried to duck. Instead she fell backwards, upsetting the footstool against the wall next to her. For a moment she hid in the shadows, afraid someone heard the clatter. When no one came, she peeked around the doorway once more. Stepmother was watching the servants help the poor maid out of the room.

“What’s the meaning of this!” Sir Roland yanked Ellery away from the door. “Why are you spying on—” He stopped speaking when she turned to face him. “It’s you,” he said, his angry face melting first into surprise, then amusement.

“I’m so sorry to disturb you, sir.” She took a step away from him, still afraid of his anger.

“So you’re a spy from Bledsoe, are you? Sent to uncover my disloyalty to the crown.” He laughed at his own cleverness, and Ellery examined her tunic’s hem.

“If it were only that simple, sir. I have a message for you.”

“Indeed. Out with it then.”

“Not here, sir.” Ellery whispered. “Away from the feast.”

“I’ve long wanted a bit of fresh air. Let’s visit my horses.” Sir Roland led her outside the manor’s back gate and into a small courtyard, where a stone stable with a thatched roof stood. The stable air was thick with the musky smell of wet straw and manure, but the place was warm and rich with the sounds of animals at rest. For a brief moment Ellery felt at peace.

“Please, rest here and give me your message.” He sat down on a benching lining the stable wall and motioned to the seat next to him.

Ellery hesitated and then sat on the bench beside him. He smelled of pine needles and leather, and she struggled to gather her thoughts. "I must warn you sir," Ellery began. "My mistress, Lady Helene. She means to do harm to you."

Sir Roland's stone expression did not change. "And how do you know this? Have you heard her speak of her plans?"

Ellery wondered at his calm. "No sir. I would tell you how I have come upon this knowledge, but I fear you would not believe me."

"You would not lie to me, I know this," Sir Roland replied. "Tell me how you know."

Ellery rose from her seat and wandered over to a slumbering grey horse. She stroked his soft nose for a moment. "The Eyes, sir. I suppose I am one of them, and I've been sent to warn you."

"I see." Sir Roland rose from the bench and began pacing the barn. Ellery could not interpret his face, but she felt that he believed her.

"When I was a boy, I lived in this wild place," Sir Roland began. "I know of the Eyes. I know their power."

Ellery continued petting the horse. She sensed a sadness about Sir Roland, but she did not speak.

"Do you know your stepmother's plans?" Sir Roland asked.

"You will marry Livia or Florentine. You will have no choice, for you will no longer be your own master. She will do with you as she pleases, as she has done with me."

Sir Roland shook his head and continued pacing. "I am not afraid of Lady Helene," he said after a few moments. "I know of her cruelty and have already been on my guard, unlike my poor guest at my table tonight. She tasted a bit of those blackberry preserves Lady Helene brought and was struck with fever."

Baffled by Sir Roland's words, Ellery looked up from the horse. How could he know of Stepmother's tricks? Perhaps he knew her in his youth, when she still lived in the village. And what of this strange fever? It was just like her father, who had been so ill before his murder. This was all so odd—she needed to speak with Haven.

"You are troubled, Ellery. What is the matter?" Sir Roland strode toward her.

"If you don't mind sir, you said you were a boy in this place," Ellery said. "Did you know Remus of Ivenwald—my father?"

Sir Roland turned his face from her. "I knew of him, of his great travels, and of his kindness to his servants."

Ellery smiled at this. "He was indeed a kind man." Ellery thought about telling Sir Roland about her situation, but she thought he would not believe her. She continued. "But did you hear of his murder?"

Sir Roland stood motionless, and his eyes met hers. "I did. A tragedy indeed."

"Did you ever hear of what happened to his murderer? Nathaniel? His footman?" Ellery stepped closer to him. Again, Sir Roland would not face her.

"I heard nothing of him. Why do you ask?"

Ellery drew a long breath and continued. "Sir Remus was my father, sir. Now I am nothing but a servant in my Stepmother's house, but I swear I speak the truth. I hope Nathaniel has long met the gallows, for he brought me nothing but sorrow." Ellery regretted her words the instant she spoke them. She did not wish for Nathaniel's execution—she simply wanted her father to be alive, and that was impossible.

Sir Roland grabbed her wrist and pulled her roughly to him. "You should not speak of what you know nothing of." Ellery struggled in his grip, but she could not release herself. "Sir," she said. "You're hurting me."

He released her wrist and turned away.

Ellery did not know what her next action should be and at length she stepped toward him. "I'm sorry for angering you sir. I must go, for the hour is almost through. Stepmother will know of my absence."

"But you mustn't go yet. I must tell you something," he pleaded with her.

"I'm sorry," she said, and ran from the stable as fast her feet would carry her. She sprinted to the pasture, through the woods, and to the house. Just as she closed the root cellar door, she heard Stepmother coming through the front door. Ellery kept the door open a crack.

"Did not Sir Roland look grand in his golden tunic? Did you see him? He couldn't keep his eyes off of me." Livia swooned.

"That's probably because you had a bit of meat wedged between your front teeth, you filthy pig." Ellery heard Livia screech and then heard a thump and a crash. Livia had probably shoved Florentine into the table by the front door.

“You stupid girls, stop this nonsense. Neither one of you charmed him. Didn’t you notice he was gone for ‘a bit of fresh air’ for over an hour,” Stepmother bellowed. Her footsteps became louder, and Ellery pulled the cellar door shut.

## Chapter 8.

The next morning found Ellery lifting small boulders in the field behind the house. Stepmother, as further punishment, had set Ellery to the task of constructing a wall lining the vegetable patch to keep the rabbits away. Ellery was undaunted by the exhausting task. The morning air was crisp and cool, and the challenge of moving the boulders and fitting them to form a wall was refreshing compared with the endless mediocrity of her daily household chores.

She wished to speak to Haven and ask him about her Father. A strange feeling—a whisper, really, had been bothering her since her meeting with Sir Roland the night before. Before Old Madge died of the fever, only a fortnight after Father's death, she had pulled Ellery into the hall closet.

"That woman's got a darkness in her eye," Old Madge had said. "She's after somethin', and you best stay out of her way."

Ellery had been unsure what to think of Old Madge's warnings; she was only ten years old at the time. But now, as she slaved in the garden, she remembered what Haven said about listening to the past. She thought of the portrait of her mother that once hung above the fireplace in the great hall. Her mother's hair was long and brown and her eyes intelligent and kind. There was a frailty about her, but her jaw was strong and firm. There was more to this woman than the portrait indicated.

As Ellery stacked the rocks, she concentrated on the image of the portrait in her mind. All around her the land was silent—the birds did not sing and the wind did not howl. She could see her mother's portrait, but it was more than an image now—the face bubbled and stretched until it

popped out from the canvas, no longer a lifeless painting. The room around the painting was alive as well—a fire crackled in fireplace, and the scent of fresh cut roses lingered in the air. Then, in a soft, breathless whisper, the portrait of Ellery’s mother began to speak.

“You are listening, my sweet girl. You are listening.” Ellery kept concentrating, afraid she would lose this precious link to the past.

“You’re looking for something, something you cannot see,” her mother breathed. “Look with me.” And in that instant, Ellery gained sight from the portrait of her mother on the wall. Before her was the kitchen, and Stepmother rocked in a chair by the fire. She plunged a silver knitting needle in and out of a ball of red yarn and stared into the fire. Her lips moved soundlessly.

Ellery heard a voice from somewhere beyond the kitchen—perhaps in the great hall. “Helene. Help me down the stair. I’m feeling much improved.” Despite the years since she had hear it, Ellery was sure the voice belonged to her father.

Stepmother looked up from her needle and yarn and then continued with her methodical plunging. Why wasn’t Stepmother rising to help him? She had certainly heard him.

“Helene!” He said, a sadness straining his voice. “Come help your poor husband down the stair!” Again, Stepmother made no effort to move. She plunged her silver knitting needle into the ball of yarn with increasing speed. Then a loud crash came from the direction of her father’s voice. “Father!” Ellery cried, but her voice echoed in her ears.

Ellery watched in horror as a cruel grin spread across Stepmother’s face. Stepmother dropped the yarn into a basket by the chair, picked up a large, leather-bound book from the table beside her, and briskly left the kitchen.

Ellery did not understand the scene that had taken place before her. This was a memory, and she could do nothing. Ellery wept, although she felt no tears wetting her face. Inside her chest the sadness burned, but soon she felt a warm, soft glow all around her. Mother.

“Just a few moments more, my sweet girl,” her mother whispered. “Then you will know all that was.”

Ellery opened her eyes and found herself looking out from the painting of the Duke of Bledsoe that hung over the fireplace in the great hall. She saw Nathaniel stooping next to Father.

“She’s done you in for good, sir,” Nathaniel said in a broken voice. “What are we to do?” He bent over Father and sobbed until his body shook.

Stepmother swept into the room and stopped at the sight of Nathaniel crouched over Father. She screamed. “Nathaniel! What have you done to Sir Remus!” Nathaniel rose to his feet, anger and sadness swelling in his face. “I’ve done nothing, my lady. What have you done?” He walked slowly toward her. “What have you done?”

Stepmother did not move.

“You’ve killed Sir Remus, and now you’re coming after me.”

Her black eyes penetrated Nathaniel. “What will your wife and boy do when you go to the gallows?”

Nathaniel stood still for a moment, his face stricken with disbelief. Then he ran from the kitchen. Stepmother too then ran from the room crying “Murder! Murder! Remus is dead!”

When Ellery awoke from this vision, she found herself seated against the wall, now half-finished. Her face was red and stained with dirt and tears. She was unsure what her next move should be. Knowing now that Stepmother had murdered Father, she knew she could not spend another minute in Stepmother’s presence.



“That’s quite a task you have before you.” Ellery looked up hoping to find Haven’s kind, wise face, but instead she saw Sir Roland, his face a silhouette against the noonday sun.

“You shouldn’t be here. Stepmother will see you speaking to me.” Ellery looked pleadingly into his eyes.

Sir Roland appeared to be examining her dirty face. “You’ve been crying. What’s upset you?” He sat down next to her. “Do not worry about your Stepmother. The wall will conceal us.”

Ellery doubted this, but she was too distraught to argue. “I want to ask you something, sir, but I’m afraid to anger you again.” Ellery examined her dirty fingers.

“I have something to tell you too that will explain my anger. I wanted to tell you last night, but you ran away.” He touched her hand for a moment. “But first, what do you want to ask me?”

This time Ellery was not surprised by his informality. Nothing could shock her now.

“Suppose someone was accused of a terrible crime—murder—but you know someone else was guilty. Suppose you discovered this in a manner no one would believe.” Ellery looked up at him.

Sir Roland’s eyes searched her face expectantly. “Go on.”

“Suppose the person who committed the crime lives beyond the law and would certainly do you harm. What would you do?”

Sir Roland was silent for a moment. “If I knew this person was guilty—if I cared at all about the person killed—I would go beyond the law and punish the murderer myself.”

Ellery shook her head. “I know this is what I must do, but I do not know how.”

Sir Roland leaned closer to her. "What do you know, Ellery? You must tell me." His breath was hot against her face. "Do not fear your stepmother."

Ellery looked into his green eyes, which burned bright with intensity.

"It does not matter what I know sir. I am bound to this place, and I cannot leave. When Stepmother learns of my secret, it will mean my undoing."

Sir Roland removed his knife from its sheath and began tracing circles in the dirt between them.

"I want to tell you something about myself," Sir Roland said. "I have not always been in this powerful position. I was once a serf as you are now. My service in the Beldsoe army brought me this power and wealth, but I have not forgotten the past. You need not fear me or your Stepmother. Now please, tell me what you know. I can help you."

Ellery was frightened now. She needed to tell him, but not here, not where Stepmother could be listening. "I cannot tell you here. She will hear us. She will know."

Sir Roland rose to his feet. He towered above her, his face red with anger.

"You have the Sight, Ellery, and yet you choose to be powerless. You have this knowledge, but you will not use it. Your fear will be your undoing." Sir Roland strode off into the woods, and Ellery cowered behind the wall. Why did he seem to care so much about all of this? What difference did it make to him if she told her secret or did not tell, if she lived or died?

## Chapter 9.

That evening after Stepmother, Livia, and Florentine retired, Ellery stayed up late into the night making blackberry pies. Stepmother had told her a guest would be coming for dinner tomorrow, and Ellery suspected she meant Sir Roland. She wondered if the poor knight were aware of this dinner party, or if he would suddenly find himself at their doorway with no idea how or why he arrived.

Ellery poured sugar into a large bowl of blackberries and stirred. Sir Roland's words scarred her memory, and she could not escape the sound of his angry accusations. She did not want to be powerless, but she had no idea how she could save herself and Sir Roland from Stepmother's schemes when Stepmother was always listening, always watching.

Ellery thought about the murderous scene she had viewed hours earlier. She had done what Haven had said and listened to the past. But now what was she supposed to do? What good did her knowledge of Stepmother's treachery do her? Now she was in more danger than before.

A gentle wind swept in through the open door, which Ellery had propped open to cool herself from the heat of the blazing fireplace. Seconds after, a large orange cat scampered into the kitchen, and Haven appeared in the doorway. He strolled over to the large table at the center of the kitchen and sat down in one of the chairs. Ellery kept stirring.

"So you've looked into the past. You've seen the truth," Haven began.

"And it does me no good," Ellery replied without looking up at him. "You can keep your Sight. I want nothing more to do with it."

To Ellery's surprise, Haven laughed. "I was selfish once too. I did not understand my gifts. I wasted them as you are now."

“What do you mean?” Ellery looked up from the bowl of blackberries.

“When I was young, I had a vision about my brother and I. We were great competitors at everything, but he always won.” Haven stared into the fire. “One night I dreamed Henry was falling through the air. I looked down upon him, but I could do nothing but watch him fall farther and farther away from me.”

Ellery left her blackberries and sat beside Haven at the table. She had never heard him speak with such clarity and sadness.

“By then I understood that my dreams often came to pass. But I was foolish, and I thought nothing of my vision of Henry. I didn’t want him to think I was odd. Then one day we were climbing trees in the woods, racing to see who could reach the highest branches. I stopped when the smaller branches began to bend beneath my feet, but Henry climbed higher. Perched on a tree branch, watching Henry climb above me, I remembered my dream and called out for him to turn back, but it was too late. One of the smaller branches snapped beneath him, and he fell to earth, breaking his neck. I could do nothing but watch him fall—as I had in my dream.”

Ellery was silent for a moment, uncertain what to say. Then she placed her hand on his.

“I’m sorry Haven. I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to be selfish and afraid. I want Stepmother to suffer for her crimes, but I simply don’t know how. You must help me.”

Haven quickly reassumed his aloof demeanor.

“As I said before, I cannot do what must be done by you. You have what you need to complete the journey before you. I have told you before. You must—“

“Listen,” Ellery interjected, growing frustrated again.

“But you listen with your ears and see with your eyes,” Haven said, his voice rising. “You do these things, but you do not feel.”

Ellery rose from her seat and began pacing the kitchen.

“You have a past, Ellery. You have memories, images, and whispers inside of you given to you by your mother, your father, and your kin. You must listen with their wisdom, Ellery. Listen and see.”

With these final words, Haven rose from his seat at the table and left the kitchen. The orange cat bounded after him into the dark night.

Ellery returned to her seat at the table and rested her head in her hands. It was her duty to bring Stepmother’s reign at Ivenwald to an end. I need to move beyond myself, Ellery thought. And I must act now, before Stepmother’s magic takes hold of Sir Roland.

Ellery moved to the rocking chair by the fireplace and stared into the flames. Ollie wandered into the kitchen from the Great Hall and curled on the rug by her feet. Ellery rocked slowly, keeping her eyes fixed on the flames, and rubbed Ollie’s back gently with her foot. Soon he was snoring, and Ellery also felt her eyelids growing heavy. Her mind clouded with darkness, and moments later in her mind’s eye, she found herself surveying the kitchen from her mother’s portrait above the fireplace.

“Look, my darling,” she heard her mother whisper. “Do not be afraid.”

Ellery opened her eyes upon the same scene she had viewed earlier that day. Stepmother rocked in the chair before the fire, plunging a silver knitting needle methodically into a ball of red yarn. But there was something different about the scene this time. A leather bound book lay open on Stepmother’s lap, and she was not staring into the flames. Stepmother read from the book, her lips mouthing each word. An incantation, Ellery thought. She’s casting a spell.

Before Ellery could examine the scene further, she awoke in the rocking chair by the fire—Ollie still slept at her feet. She needed to find Stepmother's spell book, and she now she knew where she had to look for it. Stepmother would surely be asleep at this late hour. Ellery could wait a few days until Stepmother journeyed into the village, she was desperate to uncover the truth.

Ellery crept up the back stairs and tread lightly down the second-floor corridor, which was bright with silver moonlight. When she reached Stepmother's room—barred by a heavy oak door carved with elaborate vines--Ellery paused. What if Stepmother is not asleep, she thought.

With a deep breath, Ellery pushed open the door. It creaked softly, sealing Ellery's fate. Now she could not turn back. Through the crack in the door she saw Stepmother asleep in her four-poster bed with cotton sheets dyed blood red. In her sleep Stepmother did not stir; her chest did not rise and fall with breath. She looked as though death had overtaken her—skin pale and lips cold—but Ellery knew luck was not kind enough to do her this favor. Ellery wondered why previously she had not thought to kill Stepmother while she slept—a knife perhaps, quick and swift, or she could smother Stepmother beneath her blood red pillows. But Ellery knew such cruelty did not live inside her.

Ellery examined the room. At the right side of Stepmother's bed was a basket with red yarn spilling out the top. For a few moments Ellery watched Stepmother, whose eyes remained sealed, and then crossed the room like a captive walking the plank. She reached Stepmother's bedside and dropped to her hands and knees, crawling towards the basket as quickly as she dared. Ellery sat on the cold stone floor, her back propped against Stepmother's mattress, which was so tall that Ellery's head did not reach the top.

Ellery dug through the bits of yarn and cloth and felt a flat, smooth object at the bottom. The spellbook, she thought. What luck! Ellery freed the book from the tangle of yarn surrounding it and opened it on her lap as she had seen Stepmother do minutes earlier.

Ellery could not decipher the strange, curling script that crossed the yellowed page. She had only learned to read a few words from Old Madge and only knew enough of writing to clumsily scrawl her name. I'm such a fool, Ellery thought. To think I could foil Stepmother this way. Now what am I to do?

Pondering her bad luck, Ellery absent-mindedly ran her finger over the script. As she softly rubbed, the words and letters swirled together on the page. Ellery blinked in disbelief, and in the second her eyes were closed, the words formed into pictures. A rough sketch of a girl sweeping appeared where the script had once been. What does this mean, Ellery wondered? Is this a picture of my future?

When Ellery touched the sketch of the young girl, the image changed again. A stone wall materialized around the girl, who seemed oblivious to its presence. This is me, Ellery thought. This is my prison. A lady garbed in a fine tunic strolled into the scene from the corner of the page. She carried with her a small, gilded box filled with precious gems, gold bits, and strings of pearls. Then, as Ellery watched in amazement, the woman tripped over her long skirts and spilled the contents of the chest on the floor. Sinking to her knees, the woman forgot all decorum and scrambled about the floor to gather her treasure. After picking up the larger pieces, she procured a broom from the empty expanse of the page and began to sweep the remaining bits of gold into a pile.

The moment the broom touched the floor, the wall around the young maid vanished. Her rags were replaced by a simple shift, while the lady's elegant frock disintegrated into a moth-eaten tunic.

Ellery slammed the book in astonishment. Stepmother stirred, and Ellery hastened to replace the book in the basket. Then she ran from the room with a sense of weightlessness—her feet had never seemed so quick nor her mind so clear. Now she knew the key to Stepmother's undoing.



## Chapter 10.

The next morning, Ellery stole away from the manor on the pretense of gathering more kindling for the fire. She hoped she would find Sir Roland fishing in the stream, and indeed she did. She watched for a moment as he reeled in a large trout. After a moment she quietly approached him, so quietly in fact that he seemed startled by her presence.

"Why Ellery," he said. "You creep about the wood as silently as a snake. You would make an excellent scout in Bledsoe's army."

Ellery smiled at his warmth. "I am glad to find your spirits much improved, sir," she said.

"A day spent at the stream would improve anyone's spirits," Sir Roland replied. "And just this morning, at the edge of the wood, I found a grove of blackberry bushes. Delicious!"

Something about this revelation bothered Ellery, but she could not define her concern. Ellery continued with reserve. "I need to tell you something—something I was too afraid to tell you before," she began.

Sir Roland's cheery expression dissipated. "What is it then, my girl. Don't be afraid."

"The wrong person was accused of my father's murder," she said with more force than she intended. "It wasn't his poor footman. It was my stepmother."

Sir Roland's next action surprised Ellery. Instead of pressing her for more detail, he sat down on the muddy bank and held his head in his hands. "My poor father," he said in a muffled voice.

Ellery was less astonished by this information than she perhaps should have been. The familiarity she had all along felt between herself and Sir Roland quelled her disbelief, and instead of demanding an explanation for his deception, she sat beside him on the bank.

“What is to be done now?” Ellery asked him after several long minutes. “No one will believe my story, and we can’t prove her guilt. ”

Sir Roland was silent for a moment before speaking. Then he said, “None of this matters now.”

Ellery rose to her feet in indignation. “How can you say such a thing? You were the one who told me I had to be brave enough to tell the truth, and all along you were too afraid to share your secret with me. And now you say nothing can be done! You are not the same man who spoke to me before.”

Now angry, Sir Roland also rose to his feet. “I couldn’t tell you my secret because I didn’t know if I could trust you. With one twist of your bony little arm your Stepmother could have wrung my secret out of you and used it against both of us.”

“What good are these cruel accusations now?” Ellery asked. “Let us not fight one another. There is another who we must defeat—together.”

Sir Roland turned from her and gazed into the wood. Ellery did not understand his sudden indecision. Perhaps he was afraid of revealing his lowly birth and losing the respect of his people. But vanity didn’t seem like a trait a man who had only a few days earlier begged her to tell the truth would possess. When he spoke again, Ellery formed a clear idea about the root of his reticence.

“I’ve come to see that the past is dead,” he began. “I cannot let my hatred for your stepmother destroy me. Besides, my father is long dead. Revealing the truth now will only make us look like vindictive fools.”

Ellery knew these thoughts did not belong to Sir Roland. Stepmother's dark magic had somehow overtaken him, but how had this happened so quickly? As Ellery pondered this, Sir Roland removed a handful of blackberries from his tunic pocket and tossed one of the plump purple berries into his mouth. The blackberries, Ellery thought. How could I have forgotten?

Ellery realized she was too late to benefit from Sir Roland's counsel, but she was not without a plan. Perhaps he could aid her in another way. She had to choose her words carefully.

"I see, Sir Roland. How very wise of you," Ellery hesitated for a moment, searching for words, and then continued. "But you must understand that it will be very difficult for me not to share my knowledge with anyone. A small token from you would seal my lips forever." She looked at him with wide eyes, hoping he would find her innocence charming.

"Ah yes. What pretty young maid isn't wanting gifts. And you, so loyal and kind, surely deserve something for your silence."

Ellery couldn't believe her good fortune. She waited expectantly as he produced a small leather pouch from his cloak.

"A bit of gold dust should do quite nicely," he said as he placed the bag in her outstretched hand. Ellery tucked the pouch in her tunic pocket and ran from him as quickly as she could. She felt guilty leaving him alone in woods with Stepmother's magic clouding his reason, but she knew her next course of action might save them both. She could not hesitate a moment longer.

\* \* \*

At the kitchen table, Ellery unwound the silk cord binding the leather pouch. She poured a bit of the fine powder into the palm of her hand, knowing that soon Stepmother, Livia, and Florentine would burst through the door and demand breakfast.

When she heard footsteps on the staircase, she went to the windows and threw open the shutters. Then she let the pouch slip from her hand and onto the floor. Gold dust spilled in a sparkling sheen across the kitchen, and Ellery was admiring her handiwork when Stepmother burst into the room.

“Ellery! What is this mess!” Stepmother bellowed.

“It’s nothing. I’m such a daft girl. I tripped and spilled the dustbin while I was sweeping the kitchen floor. I’ll have it clean in no time.” Ellery followed Stepmother’s eyes to the floor; the dust flickered in the firelight.

“The dust is so sparkly,” Livia cried. “I rather think it’s,”

“Gold dust!” Stepmother cried. “Where did you steal this from?” She strode toward Ellery as she spoke, but Ellery did not cower or retreat.

“I didn’t steal it. It was given to me.” Now Ellery backed toward the door.

“Never mind where she got it,” Livia shrieked. “It’s mine now!” She started for the broom, but Livia grasped her by the hair.

“Just what makes you think you can have it. Mother, Livia will only waste it on potions from the gypsies to shrink her fat behind.”

A gust of wind blew open the kitchen shutters and swept through the room, lifting the gold dust into tiny tornados of shimmering air.

Ellery reached for the broom. “Let me sweep the floor, or the wind will carry it away.”

“No. You have no place handling such precious stuff.” Stepmother strode across the room and wrenched the broom from Ellery. She slapped the broom against the floor and swept through the dust with a single, violent stroke.

The instant the broom touched the floor a change came over Stepmother. A harsh, blue light appeared around her, and the outline of her body began to crackle and flicker, as if it were made of flame.

“Mother!” Florentine cried as she and Livia crouched behind the kitchen table.

As suddenly and violently as she had begun sweeping, Stepmother dropped the broom to the floor. The blue light faded and revealed Stepmother’s pallid, stricken face. Her fine, black silk gown had vanished and was replaced by a moth-eaten, brown wool dress. Ellery was silent and motionless; if the spell were truly broken, there was only one way she could be completely sure.

Ellery turned from Stepmother and ran through the back door. Barefoot, she sprinted through the muddy pumpkin patch and the grassy field behind the manor. She didn’t stop to look, but she could hear Stepmother behind her in the distance, puffing from the exertion.

“Stop. Stop, you stupid girl. You can’t escape!” Stepmother bellowed.

Ellery’s feet were light beneath her as she ran through the woods, branches tearing at her skirt and scratching her arms. Don’t listen, she told herself. This time you can escape.

The trees around her were thinning; she was near the end of the wood. Soon she would be at the gate that bordered Sir Roland’s fief. Ellery had stood at that gate many times before and looked out across the great grass carpet that rolled out as far as she could see. She had often wondered what it would be like walk barefoot through the cool grass or to lie on one of the many hills and watch the clouds tumbling through the sky. But now as she stepped to the gate and set

one foot upon it to hoist herself over, she was unsure. The world spread before Ellery like an unmapped continent, and she was once again afraid.

Stepmother was almost to the gate now. Ellery could smell her rage.

“Come back here you foolish girl. You’re as daft as your father. You’ll end up wallowing in the fields with the rest of the filthy peasants.”

Ellery froze. Stepmother, red-faced and sweating, burst out of the trees and rushed toward her. A swift wind blew south across Sir Roland’s fief and whipped through Ellery’s hair, stinging her face and shocking her like the ice-cold water Livia and Florentine had poured on her face to wake her when she had overslept.

Just as Stepmother reached the gate, Ellery cleared the top and jumped into the soft grass. She took a final look at Stepmother—wild-eyed, hopeless, and now imprisoned by Ivenwald along with her dark magic—and walked slowly toward the lights gently glowing from the manor in the distance.

## **Chapter 11.**

Ellery leaned against the weeping willow in Sir Roland's courtyard. Spring had at last come to Bledsoe, and for the first time in her life she welcomed its arrival. Ellery had once despised the long, warm days and shunned the green and red buds bursting forth about the woods. In those days, not so long ago, only the spring rains that muted the beauty of the land could bring Ellery solace.

Now Ellery reveled in Spring's glory. The diaphanous scent of lilac and heather lingered in the air, and Ellery wanted nothing more than to lounge beneath the weeping willow and gaze over the reflecting pool, where a family of ducks was taking their morning bath.

Ellery was quick to embrace the simple luxuries her new life afforded her, but she was also careful not to lose herself to idleness. She spent her mornings studying with her tutor, and in the afternoons she often helped the gardeners cultivate the courtyard. At first Sir Roland was reluctant to let her work, but she was adamant. She would not fall prey to a shiftless life as her Stepmother and stepsisters had done.

Sir Roland's pride often irked her, but she had grown to love him over the past year. On numerous occasions he had asked her to be his bride, but she continued to refuse him. She wanted time to learn before committing her life to another. He seemed to understand her desire for freedom and allowed her stay at his manor as a ward. In time, Ellery might consent to marry him, but until then she would spend her days studying and working, pursuing the sort of life her father and mother would have wanted—the life Stepmother tried to deny her.

Ellery did not often allow Stepmother, Livia, and Florentine to enter her thoughts. She had not seen them since the day Ellery imprisoned Stepmother at Ivenwald, and she did not plan

to see them again. Ivenwald was meaningless to Ellery because now it was nothing more than a dungeon for Stepmother and her dark magic. The woods Ellery had once loved were now black with decay. With no human outlet, Stepmother's magic had poisoned the land, driving the creatures away from the forest and rotting the trees. As long as Stepmother lived, nothing would grow in Ivenwald, nothing but her abounding hatred for the world.

Ellery did not pity Stepmother or her lonely state. The dark demons of Stepmother's cruelty would be fitting companions for the wretched woman. She would not even have Livia or Florentine to console her, for Ellery had heard that Florentine had run off with a minstrel and Livia had long since married the village baker. Ellery wished them no ill will; they knew nothing but the selfishness and greed Stepmother had ingrained in them. Perhaps in time they too would be able to forget the past.

Ellery noticed an old man walking across the yard with a plump orange cat bounding through the grass behind him.

"Haven," she said. "How good of you to visit." She said this every Friday afternoon when he came to walk with her in the woods.

"And how good of you to bide awhile with me, my lady," Haven replied.

Ellery bent to pet the orange cat at his feet and then linked her hand through the crook of his arm. By now she was comfortable with the strange, crackling sensation his touch gave her. As they walked his image flickered in and out of Ellery's sight, but she was always acutely aware of his presence. They never spoke, but with one mind they thought of the past. Remus, Isannah, and Henry shared endless stories with them, and the vitality of these memories would not soon fade.